

[By Nicole Gaudiano](#)

Rep. Peter Welch has some new breakfast buddies.

The group of 14 lawmakers has no official name or website — or even good coffee. But it's bipartisan, and its members are committed to working together at a time when collaboration on even small things seems a major feat for Congress.

When the Vermont Democrat heard about their meetings this fall, he wanted in.

"They're trying to work together," Welch said. "Some of the new members have an orientation I have, and that is that we've got to make this institution function."

Rep. Jim Renacci, R-Ohio, who formed the group with Rep. John Carney, D-Del., said he doesn't want to see the membership grow "too big." But he was impressed when Welch expressed interest during a discussion they had on the House floor.

Welch might be the only member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus to join the breakfast group.

"He's brought a fresh perspective," Renacci said, adding that one of the group's main goal is to "take the party hats off when you come in."

So far, Welch, 64, has co-sponsored two pieces of legislation with group members.

One would create a pre-tax program for people working to save money toward a down payment

on a first home. Another would allow American companies to bring foreign profits back to the United States at a significantly lower tax rate — as long as that money is used to hire more workers and invest in the U.S. economy.

"I was really happy that he decided to join, because he's a real progressive, and that gives us that perspective at the table," Carney said of Welch. "Although he's progressive, he's very practical, and I think very effective."

The bipartisan breakfast group is just one way Welch has worked to forge relationships with Republicans in a ferociously partisan Congress.

Collaboration and coalition-building have long been approaches — and perhaps survival techniques — for the lone representative from Vermont, population 626,000. Those relationships have proved crucial to Welch during the past year, with Democrats in the minority in the House.

Those attributes were especially valuable in the wake of Hurricane Irene.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., got the Senate to approve replenishing the depleted federal highway emergency fund and waiving state caps on available transportation aid.

But the corresponding House legislation didn't include the waivers. Welch urged House GOP leaders to accept those provisions, which were included in the bill that passed in November. The legislation will mean tens of millions of additional dollars for road and bridge repairs in Vermont, according to Leahy's office.

That victory followed an intense lobbying effort in the House by Welch. Tapping his relationships with key Republicans, he created a bipartisan Hurricane Irene Coalition and sent every House member photos of the hurricane damage in Vermont. He moved quickly to meet with House leaders and administration officials to press for the disaster aid.

“Because of his personality, people were willing to listen to him and really heard the anxiety,” Carney said. “When you come with credibility of working with somebody and being reasonable, I think people are more likely to support what you’re asking them to do.”

Welch initially wasn’t optimistic about the prospects for Vermont. He recalled “bitter fighting” among Republican and Democratic House leaders about whether disaster aid should be offset by savings elsewhere in the budget.

And he realized Vermont had little standing to make demands for more disaster aid, represented as it was by a single member who belonged to the minority party and didn’t serve on a relevant committee.

“That usually spells disaster,” Welch said.

So he began seeking allies among Republican members whose states also had suffered damage. Welch believes he found a good turnout because of his outreach before the storm hit. Many of the Republicans he contacted were members he had worked with previously.

“It’s all part of making yourself a legislator who’s in a position to help the people you represent when the moment arises that they need help,” Welch said.

## **A 'pleasant person'**

Welch's colleagues — both Republicans and Democrats — describe him as "a pleasant person," "exceptionally nice," and "a great guy."

"He has a manner and a way that is conducive to building bridges," said Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah. "You can actually get something done with him."

Rep. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., said Welch's "excellent judgment" and his willingness to consider all sides of an issue are quickly making him one of the Democratic Party's "go-to" people regarding strategy and policy.

Welch has bipartisan respect "because he takes a thoughtful approach," said Van Hollen, ranking member on the House Budget Committee.

Bipartisan outreach is nothing new for Welch. As president pro tem in the Vermont Senate, he was the "honest broker" between then-Republican Gov. Jim Douglas and the Democratic majority on budget bills, said Eric Davis, professor emeritus of political science at Middlebury College. That helped Welch win his House seat in 2006, he said.

"Peter's approach has always been: 'I may disagree with you on this issue today, but there may be another issue tomorrow where we can work together,'" Davis said.

## **Dinner and cooperation**

After arriving in Congress, Welch began holding bipartisan dinners at his apartment to discuss issues over Costco lasagna. And he looked for issues on which he and other members could become natural allies.

For Republican Rep. Jo Ann Emerson of Missouri, that issue was making prescription drugs more affordable. Welch knew Emerson's mother-in-law had spent her life savings on medications. Together, they launched the bipartisan Congressional Affordable Medicines Caucus in May.

Welch and Chaffetz teamed up on legislation calling for the withdrawal of ground troops from Afghanistan and a new anti-terrorism strategy modeled after the Navy SEALs operation that killed Osama bin Laden.

"He heard me speak on Afghanistan and saw that there was common ground, and he said, 'Hey, let's do something together,'" Chaffetz said. "And that goes a long way."

Welch's Republican friends still disagree with him on a host of issues.

"He's, like, way too environmental for me," said Emerson, whose district is home to 95 percent of the country's lead mining. But she likes that he's "very approachable" and that he "doesn't have this huge ego."

"People in my caucus really like him even if they don't agree with him at all," she said.

Chaffetz, who counts tea party members among his supporters, said he probably disagrees with Welch more often than not, from social to fiscal issues.

"What's unique about Peter is, I look at him and I think about the things that I agree with him on," Chaffetz said.

## **Supercommittee squabble**

One of Welch's bipartisan alliances wasn't popular with progressives this year.

Welch was among 100 House members — 60 Democrats and 40 Republicans — who urged the congressional debt-reduction "supercommittee" in a Nov. 2 letter to consider "all options," including spending cuts and revenue increases, in its quest to cut deficits.

Joan McCarter, senior policy editor for the Daily Kos political website, wrote that "any real Democrat who signed onto it should be ashamed of him or herself."

McCarter said those Democrats should instead demand that Republicans hold their oath of office higher than their oath to anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist, "and support real revenue."

Welch said he would never vote for an "unbalanced" debt-reduction plan that would gut social-service programs while leaving defense spending and the Bush tax cuts untouched. But he said the national debt is an urgent problem, and progressives should participate in the debate.

"If we're not at the table, the most vulnerable will be the first to pay the biggest price," he said.